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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that a metaphor of linguistic levels, similar to that used in general linguistic theory, be applied to the study of levels within an essay. The linguistic conception of levels in a piece of writing is not sentence-paragraph-essay (which might be characterized as a rhetorical division) but rather (or in addition to) sentence-text-discourse; the skill levels to be taught in writing classes corresponding to revision, then, will be syntactic, textual, and discoursal. The paper draws a distinction between text and discourse, stating that the relationship between the two terms consists of a set of "contextual coordinates" that define a communicative or rhetorical situation: place, time, purpose, audience, reader, etc. The concept of context here must be broad enough to include both written and oral texts. The fit between the text and the coordinates defining its context specifies the degree of coherence a discourse has; that is, whereas connexity and cohesion are conditions for forming good texts, coherence reflects the appropriateness of the text, i.e., the degree to which a text matches its associated rhetorical situation, or discourses. In summary, the method of defining linguistic levels, as in the case of syntax, can be extended in a straightforward way, without ad hoc modifications, to describing text as another level. An analysis of a sample paragraph is provided. (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

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# Text As a Linguistic Level: Implications for Teaching Writing

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All of us who have taught composition for any length of time have had occasion to reflect on the way(s) we respond to student writing. For example, we must learn to distinguish, and teach our students to distinguish, among the kinds of skills we intend for them to acquire as they become fluent writers. For this purpose, we often use the metaphor of *skill levels* in order to view writing skills as a system rather than a miscellany. Writing teachers commonly use this metaphor in two senses. One refers to a writer's degree of proficiency in employing a particular skill or cluster of skills, such as editing, repairing lapses in coherence, syntactic manipulation for stylistic effect, or adjusting diction to the capacities and disposition of the primary audience. The other sense of skill levels is the one we use in phrases like "lower-order skills" and "higher-order skills."

The question is, what are the levels into which language, and thereby the skills to deal with language, is arranged? We have little trouble saying that there is a phonemic level, a morphemic level, and a syntactic level, but how do we go beyond the level of the individual sentence? Does the next level consist of a small group of sentences such as a paragraph or a larger group such as a whole essay?

In view of these questions, I would like to propose that we formally adopt the metaphor of linguistic levels within the essay similar to that used in general linguistic theory. Formal adoption does not violate (or eliminate) the metaphorical character of the concept of a level, but it does considerably clarify what we mean by that. It makes the implications of the metaphor (or, in this explicit form, the model) easier to discern and evaluate, which in turn should further illuminate what kinds of skills go into generating discursive units at a given level. My specific contention will be that the linguistic conception of levels in a piece of writing is not sentence-paragraph-essay (which might well be characterized as a rhetorical division) but rather (or in addition) sentence-text-discourse. That is, I wish to draw a sharp and, I hope, principled distinction between text and discourse. The skill levels we teach in writing classes corresponding to this revision will be *syntactic*, *textual*, and *discoursal*.

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I have two caveats about the scope of the paper. First, to respect my space limitations and the interests of my audience, I will limit my discussion to monologic written texts which are referential in aim, my examples to the level of the paragraph, and my application to the level of the text. Second, text is one component of a global model of linguistic organization that also includes a syntactic level and a discourse level (Chomsky, *Lectures*; Harnish and Farmer; LeTourneau, *Conditions*). I will have nothing to say about the first and only a little about the second.

I have organized the rest of this article into four segments: (1) distinguishing text from discourse; (2) describing text as a linguistic level; (3) exemplifying the model with a sample paragraph; (4) discussion of the model's implications for teaching textual and discoursal writing skills.

## Distinguishing text from discourse

The distinction between text and discourse was first made, as far as I am aware, in the late 1970s by scholars in contiguous disciplines: Kinneavy in discourse typology, Widdowson in applied linguistics, and van Dijk in text linguistics. In van Dijk's terms, text is "the theoretical construct underlying what is usually called discourse" (3). In essence, a text is a finite sequence of sentences defined by certain formal properties, some of which will be identified as we proceed. So understood, text is distinct from discourse, which may be informally defined as a text associated with a situational or rhetorical context. I am claiming, then, that a text is an idealization, an abstraction of a conventional kind, the properties of which can be precisely characterized apart from its use in some situational context.

The text/discourse distinction has considerable intuitive appeal, and I will adopt it without further argument, but its correctness is not self-evident and has been challenged. I will reluctantly put this dispute aside, noting only that, in the course of refining this work, I have found good reasons to find the objections moot [1]. With this background, we now turn to the second issue: defining text formally as a linguistic level.

## Text as a linguistic level

The formal characterization of levels of representation in generative linguistics begins with Chomsky's *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (LSLT). In LSLT, Chomsky defines a linguistic level as a set of units, operations, and relations, the members of which are:

a. a set of basic units to be arranged to form larger units at the next level of linguistic representation
b. the operation of concatenation, which linearly orders basic units
c. the derived units formed by linearly ordering basic units
d. relations that hold among basic units after concatenation
e. a means of relating the units in (c) to those at other levels of

linguistic representation

Before I try to apply this definition to texts, let me illustrate how it works with a familiar level of linguistic structure, syntax. The basic units for syntax, ignoring important current controversy, are words, which are concatenated (b) in certain orders to form phrases and sentences, the derived units (c) at this level. Relations within a sentence (d) are of various kinds; for example, there is an identity relation holding between the same words in the same order, along with various hierarchical relations, so that in a tree diagram (for English) the subject is "higher" than the objects of a verb. One might suppose that constructions considered to be paraphrases of each other would belong here, for instance, the active/passive relation or that between direct/indirect object constructions and those containing a prepositional phrase (I mailed Belle a letter/I mailed a letter to Belle). Let us now apply the definitions above to texts. The results are as follows:

a. Basic units: orthographic text sentences
b. Principle of linear order: right concatenation
c. Derived units: texts (including paragraphs)
d. Relations between basic units (i.e., between sentences): ordering relations
e. Relations with higher levels: associating a text with (a) discourse(s)

With reference to (a), the basic units of a (written) text would be orthographic system sentences, that is, sentences regarded as grammatical units, following Lyons (1977:622). The operation of concatenation, (b), will be understood as right concatenation, so that it proceeds in only one direction; hence, if sentence p concatenates with sentence q, then p precedes q and not the other way around [2].

Now comes an important point. I noted above that concatenating words into sentences results in organizing those words into hierarchically structured groupings. If so, it is natural (though of course not necessary) to extend this reasoning to suppose that (right) concatenation of sentences into texts also allows texts to be organized into hierarchies. Anyone familiar with levels of generality in Christensen rhetoric, textual macrostructures (van Dijk and Kintsch), or textual plans (Meyer) can see that considering texts as hierarchies is possible. Thus we get item (c) above: The unit derived by concatenating a series of sentences will be a text, consisting, in principle, of hierarchically organized sentences.

Describing the relations among sentences has been the focus of so much research in text linguistics and brings us back to the principle that if p precedes q, then q does not precede p. Do we want further to allow that either p or q may precede the other? Probably not, because adjacent sentences in a text usually cannot be freely permuted [3]. This is true even when a more general term like *color* and a more specific term like *blue* may occur in consecutive sentences, with either the class term or the the more specific term—the hyponym—appearing first. Reversing the order of the class term and the hyponym normally requires that the sentences in which they occur must be rewritten, contrary to what we would expect if either sentence could come first. Evidence for this can be seen in the two examples below. In these examples, the hyponym is in italics and the class term in bold face, and the pound sign marks the (sub)text as deviant.

a. Jane enjoys *collecting stamps*. That is a popular **hobby**.
b. #That is a popular **hobby**. Jane enjoys *collecting stamps*.

c. People take up various **hobbies**. Jane's is *collecting stamps*.
d. #Jane's is *collecting stamps*. People take up various **hobbies**.

These examples show that text sentences cannot freely permute, but this is not sufficient to bar the full range of unacceptable sentence sequences. To further constrain concatenation, I propose that texts must, to some degree, satisfy two conditions of good formation: a condition of **"syntactic" integrity**, called *connexity*, and a condition of **semantic integrity**, called *cohesion*, in the terminology of Hatakeyama, Petoti, and Sozer. Three ways of achieving connexity and cohesion in the text linguistic and paragraph rhetoric literature are (i) cohesive ties (Halliday and Hasan), (ii) recurrence chains and equivalence chains (Markels), and (iii) levels of semantic generality (Christensen, Coe, Polanyi). We can probably explain levels of generality by applying the notion of hyponymy to propositions (i.e., considering a sentence to be a proposition). That is, a sentence at a lower level of generality (a more specific sentence) is a propositional hyponym to a sentence at a higher level of generality. This concept is similar to the lexical hyponymy shown in the two pairs of sentences above, in which a word in one sentence is more specific than a word in the other. Markel's equivalence chains, which are instances of hyponymic relationships, are relevant here as well.

To complete our discussion of the characteristics of a text, we look at (e), the last requirement for considering text to be a linguistic level. This is the need for there to be a relation between text and discourse. This relationship consists of a set of "contextual coordinates" that define a communicative or rhetorical situation: place, time, purpose, audience/reader, etc. The concept of context here, as the inclusion of reader is meant to indicate, must be broad enough to include both written and oral texts. The fit between the text and the coordinates defining its context specifies the degree of *coherence* a discourse has; that is, whereas connexity and cohesion are conditions for forming good texts, coherence reflects the *appropriateness* of the text, i. e., the degree to which a text matches its associated rhetorical situation, or discourse(s) (analogous to, and perhaps including, Grice's maxims).

To conclude this section, I submit that the method of defining linguistic levels, with which we are all familiar in the case of synatx, can be extended in a straightforward way, without ad hoc modifications, to describing text as another level. A text, then, is a concatenation of sentences subject to the conditions of connexity and cohesion.

**Analysis of a Sample Paragraph**

Let us see how such an analysis illuminates paragraph structure. For the analysis, I will use the following paragraph from Markels (1984:51-52):

***(1) From a Greek word meaning "to use words of good omen," "euphemism" is the substitution of a pleasant term for a blunt one—telling it like it isn't. (2) Euphemism has probably existed since the beginning of language. (3) As long as there have been things of which man thought the less said the better, there have been better ways of saying less. (4) In everyday conversation, the euphemism***

*is, at worst, a necessary evil; at its best, it is a handy verbal tool to avoid making enemies needlessly, or shocking friends. (5) Language purists and the blunt spoken may wince when a young woman asks at a party coyly for directions to the "powder room," but to most people this kind of familiar euphemism is probably no more harmful or annoying than, say, the split infinitive.*

Let us apply the definition of a text to this paragraph. The basic units will be the orthographic sentences (1)-(5), ignoring, as in a Christensen-style paragraph analysis, the internal structure or complexity of the sentences, without inferring or implying that these do not affect cohesiveness (cf. Markels 14, 52). Right concatenation yields an ordering that is intuitively regarded as a paragraph, and, in fact, a connexive and cohesive one, rather than a random sequence of unrelated sentences. Inasmuch as concatenation is necessary but not sufficient for connexity and cohesion, we must ask what other properties distinguish this from uncohesive or semicohesive paragraphs. Let us consider relations among the sentences. First, there is a lexical relation: the word *euphemism* occurs in every sentence in the paragraph except (3), in each case as the subject of a clause, though not always at the beginning of the sentence. These sentences thus exhibit cotopicality (having the same topic paired with various comments); equivalently, they form a recurrence chain in Markel's taxonomy, in which a single term is repeated in various (perhaps all) sentences of a paragraph (7). There is also an instance of lexical hyponymy between *euphemism* and *powder room*. These lexical relations contribute to the cohesion and probably the connexity of the paragraph.

There must be more to it than this, however, because neither cotopicality nor a recurrence chain suffices to establish (full) connexity or cohension, as the next example, also from Markels (44), shows:

*Alfred likes peaches. Oregon doesn't grow peaches. Peaches contain nitrogen. We have a peach tree in our backyard. No one throws rotten peaches at politicians or ball players. Cut five peaches and sprinkle with sugar. Do you think peach melba would be a good dessert?*

The last two sentences in this example suggest one reason why it fails to cohere: they perform illocutions (speech acts) that are not related to those of the preceding sentences [4]. By contrast, in the first example, euphemisms are defined in (1), described historically in sentences (2)-(3), and evaluated in (4)-(5), with (3) being the pivot sentence (in that it performs two speech acts: historical narration in the first clause, and evaluation in the second). The semantic cohesion supplied by the cohesive speech act sequence is seconded by levels of generality, as the diagram below shows:

1 From a Greek word meaning "to use words of good omen," "euphemism" is the substitution of a pleasant term for a blunt one—telling it like it isn't.

2 Euphemism has probably existed since the beginning of language.

3 As long as there have been things of which man thought the less said the better, there have been better ways of saying less.

2 In everyday conversation, the euphemism is, at worst, a necessary evil; at its best, it is a handy verbal tool to avoid making enemies needlessly, or shocking friends.

3 Language purists and the blunt spoken may wince when a young woman asks at a party coyly for directions to the "powder room," but to most people this kind of familiar euphemism is probably no more harmful or annoying than, say, the split infinitive.

I take history and evaluation to be subordinate to definition but not to one another. Sentence (3) is in turn subordinate to (2) as reason to claim, and (4) is similarly subordinate to (5) as example to generalization. The grouping of sentences by speech act and level of generality is signaled by the connexity of tense sequences: (1) is simple present, (2)-(3) are present perfect, and (4)-(5) return to simple present.

**Implications and Conclusions**

I want to close with some reflections on the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the model sketched here. Regarding theory, the connexity and cohesiveness of the first example above are due to interaction among various facets of its lexical, grammatical, and illocutionary organization: cotopicality, hyponymy, levels of generality, illocutionary sequences, and tense sequences. This suggests two heuristic principles for further developing the model: (i) that a modular approach of the sort adopted here is likely to be necessary for a rigorous and nonreductive analysis of cohesiveness, (ii) that the class of "relations" required above by the rules for defining text as a linguistic level is likely to be the various devices that put limits on concatenation in order to bar unacceptable textual sequences. The challenge will be to propose constructs that are both explicit enough to be testable and restrictive enough to delimit the class of texts to those that would be accepted as such by fluent writers.

Turning to the pedagogical implications, let us now reconsider the linguistic conception of levels of writing skill in the light of the text/discourse distinction and the model of text. Distinguishing text and discourse seems to have two related applications to the task of enhancing students' writing skills. On the one hand, it permits students to attend carefully to linguistic features of an essay above the sentence level as a separate task from considering rhetorical variables such as audience or situation. The skills associated with the level of text will involve deploying linguistic resources for enhancing connexity and cohesion. The examples of these resources in the analysis of the paragraphs above suggest them to be a diverse (though I think coherent) set, possibly a system. Bill McCleary (editorial communication) notes that instruction in cohesion is often neglected in writing courses "except for a a rather superficial treatment of transitions." The resources to do more are available in some rhetorics (Hartwell, Cooper and Odell); they deserve to be better known and more widely exploited.

On the other hand, we can use the text/discourse distinction to clarify the abstract notion of adapting to a rhetorical situation. Treating texts as formal objects in abstraction from situational contexts raises the possibility of associating a single text with multiple contexts and, conversely, of associating a single context with multiple texts. Hence, if we pair a text with a situation for

which it is patently inappropriate, e. g., the Kennedy inaugural in the setting of the 1992 Republican Convention—we can make concrete for students the abstraction "rhetorical situation" and make it amenable to rhetorical analysis. A variation on this would be to exploit the concept of illocutionary ambiguity, the idea that we may not be able to identify the speech act performed by a text unless the text is inserted into a rhetorical situation which disambiguates it. Consider the (single-word) text *Fire!* This may be interpreted either as a command (to a firing squad or a battalion or infantry) to shoot or as an urgent announcement that a building, say, a theater, is on fire. Only associating the text with a situational context will tell us which speech act (and which part of speech—verb or noun) is intended. This example illustrates quite clearly that texts are not, as is sometimes maintained, purely communicative acts; if they were, it is unclear how such contextual disambiguation is possible or why it is necessary. Insofar as a text can be associated with multiple contexts, appropriate or not, the context can be treated as a theoretical construct distinct from the text. This in turn means that the skills associated with the level of discourse are distinct from those associated with text. Skills at the discourse level are those that involve enhancing the coherence of a discourse as distinct from the connexity and cohesion of the text underlying it. This division of labor seems to correspond fairly closely with distinctions among skills that we typically make in our writing courses.

Theoretical questions about the ontological status of texts in contrast to discourses suggest implications that might be interesting to discuss in advanced writing classes as well. Characterizing texts as a linguistic level permits us to regard them as objects, even though the object so defined is abstract. More particularly, it requires us to believe that certain aspects of textual interpretation are only within the text and thus are independent of context, whether broadly or narrowly understood. Such a claim bristles with epistemological and hermeneutic questions. For instance, it may not be easily reconciled with theories of audience inspired by reader response criticism that assign a large share of responsibility to the reader in the transaction of constructing meaning. Similar remarks apply to psycholinguistic theories of the reading process (Smith). The hypothesis may also be in tension with deconstructionism—I do not understand it well enough to make an informed judgment about this—in its assertion of the pervasive indeterminacy of interpretation for at least literary texts. Such tensions and controversy are healthy, and are in any case inevitable in a multidiscipline like composition. My hope would be that the explicitness of the model outlined here will allow such questions to be formulated clearly enough that progress toward answering them is thereby facilitated.

### Notes

[1] Rebuttal of some of these objections can be found in "Syntax, Text, and Discourse: Toward a Modular Theory," the work-in-progress on which the present article is based.

[2] The choice of right concatenation is intended only to capture the fact that texts unfold in a temporal sequence and to give concrete form to the operation for expository purposes; it is, as far as I can see, entirely independent of the question of whether the orthography of a language moves left-to-right (like English) or right-to-left (like Arabic) or sometimes vertically (like Japanese, as I understand).

[3] Throughout this discussion, I am, for simplicity's sake, restricting attention to adjacent text sentences; ordinarily, transposition of nonadjacent sentences will, *a fortiori*, be even less acceptable than the examples given here.

[4] Ironically, the last two sentences would form a coherent speech act sequence in a situation in which two persons are preparing a dessert recipe for peaches and are trying to decide what to make. But the paragraph evokes neither that situation nor any coherent situation whatsoever.

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